

At a recent panel presentation, one brand expert declared \$150k as the price of admission for any company truly serious about branding. If, however, you can't make a six-figure commitment just yet, here's how to spur your organization to harness the power of a memorable brand.

Bootstrap Branding

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Gold-Plated Brands

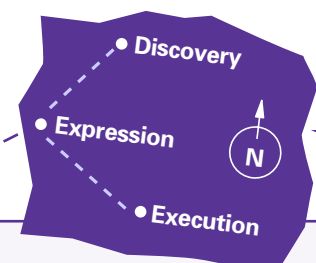
Fact is, the companies most cited by the panel as stellar branding examples—Nike, Coca-Cola, McDonald's, Intel, etc.—are masters of what one might term “deep pockets branding.” They have, to a large extent, bought their way into American's hearts and minds thanks to multi-million-dollar marketing, advertising and promotional campaigns executed, perhaps, over decades. Behind these dollars, of course, are quality people, products, services and reputations that successfully and continually fulfill each brand's promise to its customers.

So, does that mean branding is strictly a high-rollers' game? Is \$150k, as one panelist cited half-jokingly, the minimum price tag for discovering and conveying the soul of a company? Must organizations simply “go without” if they can't prudently make that kind of investment at this stage of their growth? My answer is a resounding NO!

Branding For The Rest of Us

There are many layers of value, both tangible and intangible, to the process of self-discovery that gives birth to memorable, lasting brands. Even if the new logo and tag line never make it to four-color print and network television, the process that generated them helps to instill a deeply ingrained and thoughtfully aligned sense of purpose to the members of the organization. It can and will make a difference that customers, partners and eventually the accountants, too, will begin to notice.

So, if you, your company or your clients have experienced branding “sticker shock,” here are few “sweat equity” steps you can take to begin your own bootstrap branding journey.



When In Doubt, Use A Road-map

Whether the budget is four, five or six figures, successful branding demands a thoughtful, sequenced approach. The accompanying roadmap will help you take your brand from “gleam in the eye” to “valued business asset” by addressing key questions in three, concise phases.

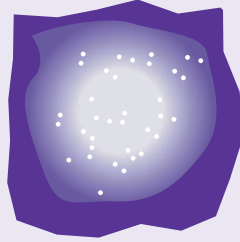
First *discover* the essence of your brand, then take definitive action to *express* it uniquely and, ultimately, to *execute* it strategically in every aspect of your business. A “reality check” between each phase ensures precisely the right fit for your organization.

Discovery

1 Brand Discovery

- *Who are we and what do we stand for?*

Think back to the original inspiration or vision that started it all for you. Consider what your customers most enjoy and value about doing business with you. Distill the essence of what it is they get from your organization that they can't get from anyone else. You'll discover your brand precisely where your passion, performance and point-of-difference converge.



Typical Deliverables

A "brand essence" document to formally capture such elements as target markets and respective value propositions; an official company description; any phrases that convey your brand promise in a few memorable words; also, visual "raw material" (napkin sketches and white-board brainstorm) as a starting point for development of graphic elements of the brand identity.

Reality Check

Are we just blowing smoke here or does the brand vision hold meaning for line employees, customers, prospects, partners and competitors? In particular, do customers agree with our assessment of the value we provide to them? Do we have a truly distinctive and memorable brand concept? Run the brand essence past a few insightful members of your "kitchen cabinet" to help ensure quality.

3 Brand Execution

- *How do we get our brand off the drawing board?*

You've got the look, but the "feel" is something you and your organization must create on your own. It's the **total experience** of your company: the way phones are answered, how products and services are delivered, your approach to the sales process, the style of communication, the value placed on people. All these "expressions of your brand" build on the work in phases 1 and 2, and they are just as vital, if not more so, than your brand's graphic packaging. Also important is ensuring "brand discipline" for advertising, marketing, website and other media/channels.



Output From This Step

Detailed plans for communicating the brand to employees, customers and other stakeholders (e.g., strategic marketing plan); brand elements extended consistently to signage, web site, print collateral, trade shows, product packaging, etc.

Execution

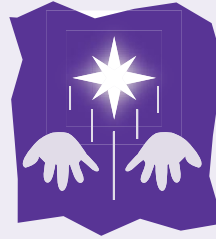
The Process



2 Brand Expression

- *What's the look and feel we want to convey?*

To distill the "look" of your brand—its visual identity—you'll want to open up the checkbook and work with qualified creative professionals in corporate image/graphic design. You can save time and money, however, pulling together visual samples from competitors and any other companies whose branding appeals to you. Setting out with a few parameters in mind is preferable to starting with a blank piece of paper, and is considerably more cost effective.



Reality Check

Will the visual elements of our brand stand out in a crowd? Does the look-and-feel comfortably reflect our company's personality? Are we stepping on any other brand toes? Here again, feedback from insightful members of the "kitchen cabinet" or an informal focus group can help. Use caution, however, in managing the size of the approval loop.

Typical Deliverables

Trademark search/filing (if needed); a company logo, official tag line and business identity system; a firm sense of company reputation; any indicated revisions for strengthening the brand concept.

Illustrations by Gecko Media.

Expression

Discovery



Expression



Execution



Brand Forward

If you and your team devote quality time and rigorous attention to solidifying this “framework,” you’ll have bootstrapped your brand to a level that some firms spend hundreds of thousands of dollars to reach. And, you can employ a scalable, just-in-time approach to developing campaigns and collateral materials that will carry your brand proudly into the marketplace. The caveats here are clarity, conviction and compelling execution. Try to avoid “branding-by-committee” which may be potentially more problematic than no branding at all.

Major Brand Investment

Are there times when you should spend big bucks on branding? Absolutely—particularly when there is a strategic case for capturing dominant market share or dramatically increasing market capitalization. Yet, branding at any price is not a silver bullet for success. To be effective, your brand must be backed by products, services and technologies that provide outstanding value to customers over the long haul.

Whether gold-plated or bootstrapped, branding at its best is a discipline practiced consistently in every aspect of your business. The journey begins here:

*To change the way
other people think about your company,
change **first** the way
your company thinks about itself.*



About The Author

Richard Layton is the founder of Transform Communications, a consulting practice dedicated to *Cutting the Cost of Confusion*™. Rich has delivered, literally, millions of dollars in bottom line results through branding, integrated marketing and communications for such clients as BP Amoco, GAF, Intel and J. Sainsbury’s Grocers (UK).

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